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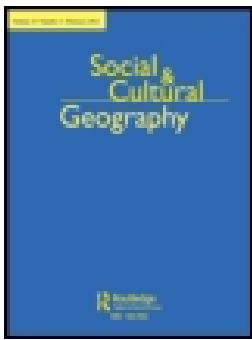
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# Spirit knows: materiality, memory and the recovery of Spiritualist places and practices in Stoke-on-Trent

Nadia Bartolini<sup>a</sup>, Sara MacKian<sup>b</sup> and Steve Pile<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Environment and Sustainability Institute, University of Exeter, Cornwall Campus, Penryn, UK; <sup>b</sup>Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK; <sup>c</sup>Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

## ABSTRACT

Much has been written about constructing memories of place, yet few speak of the difficulties in dealing with lost, partial and fragmented histories of place. We argue that behind the idea of 'memory of place' is an assumption that these memories are recoverable and can build a sense of place. Our research has led us to assume the opposite: not just that the fragments of history cannot build a complete memory of place, but that this understanding of memory and place is itself skewed by its reliance on materiality. This paper stems from a project that explores the place of spirituality in everyday life through insights from Spiritualist churches and their congregations. Whilst evidence of Spiritualist locations can be partially obtained through documentary records, a key challenge has been in understanding practices in the context of Spiritualism's disassociation with materiality and the centrality of Spirit. The paper concludes that retracing Spiritualism's past, and capturing its contemporary spiritual practices, uncovers a 'memory of place' that is not only in constant transience, but that can only be known through Spirit.

## L'Esprit le sait: matérialité, mémoire et récupération de lieux et pratiques du spiritualisme à Stoke-on-Trent

### RÉSUMÉ

On a beaucoup écrit sur la construction de mémoires d'un lieu et pourtant peu parlent des difficultés à gérer les histoires perdues, partielles et fragmentées d'un lieu. Nous soutenons que derrière l'idée de « mémoire d'un lieu » se trouve une assumption que les mémoires sont récupérables et peuvent construire un esprit du lieu. Notre recherche nous a mené à assumer le contraire : pas seulement que les fragments d'histoire ne peuvent pas construire une mémoire complète du lieu, mais aussi que cette compréhension de la mémoire et du lieu est elle-même déformée par sa dépendance de la matérialité. Cet article a son origine dans un projet qui explore le lieu de spiritualité dans la vie de tous les jours à travers la connaissance d'églises et de congrégations spiritualistes. Bien que des preuves d'emplacements spiritualistes puissent être obtenues partiellement à travers la documentation de registres, un défi majeur a été de comprendre les pratiques dans le contexte de la dissociation entre le

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## PALABRAS CLAVE

materialidad; memoria;  
vida cotidiana; Espíritu;  
Espiritismo; Stoke-on-Trent

Spiritualisme et la matérialité et de la centralité de l'Esprit. Cet article conclut que retracer le passé du Spiritualisme et saisir ses pratiques spirituelles contemporaines mettent à jour une « mémoire du lieu » qui non seulement est en constante transition mais encore qui peut seulement être connue à travers l'Esprit.

## **El espíritu sabe: materialidad, memoria y recuperación de lugares y prácticas espiritistas en Stoke-on-Trent**

### **RESUMEN**

Mucho se ha escrito sobre la construcción de memorias de lugar, sin embargo, poco se habla de las dificultades para lidiar con historias de lugar perdidas, parciales y fragmentadas. Se argumenta que detrás de la idea de 'memoria de lugar' está la suposición de que estos recuerdos son recuperables y que pueden construir un sentido de lugar. Nuestra investigación ha llevado a suponer lo contrario: no solo que los fragmentos de la historia no pueden construir un recuerdo completo del lugar, sino que esta comprensión de la memoria y el lugar está en sí misma distorsionada por su dependencia en la materialidad. Este documento surge de un proyecto que explora el lugar de la espiritualidad en la vida cotidiana a través de las ideas de las iglesias espiritistas y sus congregaciones. Mientras que la evidencia de localizaciones espiritistas se puede obtener parcialmente a través de registros documentales, un desafío clave ha sido comprender las prácticas en el contexto de la disociación del Espiritismo con la materialidad y la centralidad del Espíritu. El artículo concluye que volver sobre el pasado del Espiritismo y capturar sus prácticas espirituales contemporáneas descubre una 'memoria del lugar' que no solo está en transitoriedad constante, sino que solo puede conocerse a través del Espíritu.

## **Introduction**

In 1995, Jay Winter wrote that 'the [Spiritualist movement] faded into the margins of cultural history [in the 1950s], where it has remained to this day' (Winter, 1995, p. 77; also alluded to in Stringer, 2008). By contrast, 15 years later David Wilson argued, '... there is little doubt that the British Spiritualist movement is still an active one' (Wilson, 2011, p. 186).

Part of the difficulty of understanding the place of British Spiritualism today lies in challenging the assumption that the movement has all but disappeared. For sure, Spiritualism's most influential times in the U.K. took place during the Victorian period and the First World War (Hazelgrove, 2000; Oppenheim, 1985). However, after the Second World War, even after the repeal of the 1735 Witchcraft Act (by Winston Churchill's administration in 1952), Spiritualism as a movement is deemed to have diminished to such an extent that it is largely irrelevant in contemporary Britain. This view is undercut by the latest U.K. Census figures, where Spiritualism rose by 17% in England and in Wales since 2001 (ONS Census data from 2001 to 2011). Since Spiritualists are part of the religious make-up of Britain today, and almost nothing is known of the movement since the 1950s, how can we recover their recent history? One way is to explore the memories and experiences of Spiritualists themselves.

Cultural geographers have focused on social memory as a way to approach the relationship between memory and place. Conceptually, what has been important in these studies is the foundational work of Pierre Nora (1989) who engaged with the idea of the state

producing *lieux de mémoire* to commemorate collective memory. When memory is associated with forms of identity, narratives of the present are based on weighing an 'official' factual history with a more subjective (re)creation of memories from the past (Hoelscher & Alderman, 2004; Jones & Garde-Hansen, 2012; Middleton & Brown, 2005; Nora, 1989; Robertson & Hall, 2007). Geographers have built on this work by investigating spaces and practices whereby memory is experienced in the everyday, and hence there is a recognition that spaces and practices are implicated in the ways that memory is individually and socially produced in everyday activities and places (Atkinson, 2007; DeLyser, 2005, 2015; DeSilvey, 2006; Morrison, 2013; Till, 2005; Tolia-Kelly, 2004). In a recent article in this journal, Meah and Jackson (2016) reconsider Nora's *lieux de mémoire* through an everyday private space, the kitchen, and how memories feature in the curation and preparation of food. While intangible and performative aspects have been incorporated within the debates on memory, the majority of work has focused on materiality and the assumption that materials can 'speak' to histories and memories. Indeed, in many cases, what researchers discover in official records and domestic spaces is a plethora of materials that are associated with histories and memories. Less attention has been paid to the challenges in dealing with lost, partial and fragmented histories of place – in other words, how to grasp a whole amidst missing parts – and the relationship between materiality, intangibility, and memory. That said, some geographers have theorized the rapprochement between the seen and the unseen in contemporary urban life by engaging with phantasmagorias, ghosts, and hauntings (Edensor, 2008; Maddern & Adey, 2008; Pile, 2005). These studies deploy notions of spectrality to capture traces, and to understand the weaving of the paranormal/supernatural into everyday life.<sup>1</sup>

Our contribution is to introduce spirituality in ways that interfere with commonplace understandings of the place of memory and with the kinds of questions posed by spectrality. In our project *Spirited Stoke: Spiritualism in the Everyday Life of Stoke-on-Trent (SpELS)*, we sought to locate Spiritualist histories and the place of Spirit through Spiritualist practices. While some have attempted to understand spirituality and spiritual practices through embodiment (Lea, 2009; Lindenbaum, 2012; Rose, 2010) and materiality (Badone, 2015; Dwyer, Tse, & Ley, 2016; Dwyer, 2015), there is little research in geography that explores the relationship between the ineffable aspects of spirituality and how these are juxtaposed in everyday places and practices<sup>2</sup> (see Bartolini, Chris, MacKian, & Pile, 2017; MacKian, 2012). This paper, therefore, dwells upon the ways that we uncovered histories and memories by taking into account Spirit and place.

The word spirit is often associated with discarnate entities. Thus, it can be understood as a synonym for the ghost, evoking the ghostly, spectral, and haunting qualities of place, as in 'spectro-geographies' (Maddern & Adey, 2008). However, for the Spiritualists we spoke to, Spirit (with a capital letter) refers to another form of existence, after the death of the body. Significantly, Spiritualists would correct us if ever we elided Spirit and ghost. Spirit is not a synonym for ghost; rather, the ghost is a very specific manifestation of Spirit. This is not to say that Spiritualists have an agreed understanding of Spirit. Rather, Spiritualism is an exploration of what Spirit is and what Spirit does. Thus, in our participants' notebooks, we found often repeated phrases that give Spirit form, presence and agency, such as: 'Spirit never lets us down'; 'Spirit knows'; 'Spirit is energy'; 'Spirit provides help'; 'Spirit working'.

While the principal aim of the SpELS project was to produce a public exhibition<sup>3</sup> in collaboration with the Spiritualist community, this paper specifically focuses on the idea of 'memory of place' and the approaches taken to uncover Spiritualist places and practices in

Stoke-on-Trent. To do this, the first part of the paper discusses Spiritualism and the SpELS project to highlight why Stoke-on-Trent was chosen as *the* place to investigate the movement. The second part looks at the problem of tracing and reinterpreting forgotten places in the city through the lens of a Spiritualist history. Finally, the third part explores finding ways to represent Spirit, by highlighting the mutable and ineffable meanings both of spirituality and of being a Spiritualist today. In the course of our research, we increasingly noticed that the loss of history was of more concern to us than to the Spiritualists. This has led us to challenge our assumptions about materiality and memory of place by unpacking how intangible aspects of spirituality are interwoven with everyday practices and places.

## Spiritualism, SpELS and Stoke-on-Trent

The origins of contemporary Spiritualism are frequently attributed to the series of disturbances in Hydesville, New York in 1848 (Boddington, 1949; Brandon, 1983; Nelson, 1969; Oppenheim, 1985; Walliss, 2001). Two sisters, Kate and Margaret Fox, were present when knocks subsequently to be known as ‘spirit rappings’ occurred in their home. Interest in their account spread to the West of the United States and across the Atlantic, reaching Britain in the 1850s (Brandon, 1983; Oppenheim, 1985).<sup>4</sup> Despite later admissions of fraud, the sisters’ account strengthened into a culturally significant Spiritualist movement until the end of the Second World War. However, since the 1950s, Spiritualism is assumed to have more or less died out in Britain. As a consequence, little is known about it.

Spiritualism encompasses many ideas from the major world religions including the belief that the soul continues to live after the death of the physical body. Spiritualism’s main difference is that communication with the dead is possible through trained mediums. Historically, it is this fundamental tenet – and its associated practices, especially spirit mediumship and healing – that has distinguished Spiritualism from other religions. Indeed, Spiritualism is often caricatured as consorting with the devil or as paranormal entertainment or as manipulative trickery.

The SpELS project took shape when results from the 2011 England and Wales Census revealed not only the presence of Spiritualism, but also an increase in people defining themselves as Spiritualists. What was particularly interesting for us was that while Spiritualism increased the major religions in the Census decreased. When we dug deeper into the numbers, we found that there was a 27% increase of Spiritualists between 2001 and 2011 in the West Midlands. Clearly, there is a question here that is missing from studies of religion in geography (Bartolini, Chris, et al. 2017): why is Spiritualism growing and why especially in the West Midlands? To examine this phenomenon, we honed in on Stoke-on-Trent, a post-industrial city in the heart of the West Midlands. Importantly, this is where Gordon Higginson, the longest serving President of the Spiritualists’ National Union was born (Bassett, 1990). It is also where Sir Oliver Lodge, a turn of the century physicist from Stoke-on-Trent famous for his research into radio waves and electromagnetic radiation, participated in collecting data for the Society for Psychical Research and met with numerous mediums following the death of his son Raymond in the First World War (Lodge, 1927, 1929, 1931, 1932). While he did not call himself a Spiritualist, the communications Lodge had with his departed son led him to declare ‘I am convinced of human survival and the persistence of personality’ (Lodge, 1932, p. 15). At the height of Spiritualism, between 1870 and 1920, there was one Spiritualist church in each of the six confederate towns that make up Stoke-on-Trent (i.e. Burslem,

Fenton, Hanley, Longton, Stoke and Tunstall). Today, the city has three active Spiritualist churches in Burslem, Fenton and Longton. Despite a vibrant Spiritualist community, understanding Spiritualism in Stoke-on-Trent's post-war history is compromised by a series of challenges.

It is one thing to identify the Spiritualist churches and gain a sense of their congregations, yet quite another to find evidence of Spiritualism's history in the contemporary urban landscape. This is partly because Stoke-on-Trent has been involved in a number of planned redevelopments and regeneration strategies over the last 50 years, some of which have radically changed the landscape, erasing all traces of its material past. Despite Arnold Bennett describing Stoke-on-Trent as having an 'enchanted air' (Bennett, 1902/2001, p. 73), the history of Stoke-on-Trent is dominated by its association with de-industrialization and decline. Once renowned for its Victorian pottery industry and making the world's finest bone china, Stoke-on-Trent lives in the shadow of its past glories. Affectionately nicknamed 'The Potteries', this area is now most famous for its post-industrial demise and for being the most working-class city in the UK (Edensor, 2000).

This is a city that is engaged in an intractable struggle to reverse industrial and economic decline (*The Sentinel*, 1 March 2016). In recent years, the City Council has tried to reinvigorate the region and overcome its impoverished reputation both by drawing on the city's industrial heritage and by redesigning it as a city of culture (Local Cultural Strategy, 2003–2008). The desire to change Stoke-on-Trent's image suffers from an almost exclusive emphasis on its pot-based past that overlooks other aspects of its history and cultural heritage, including Spiritualism. It was not always like this. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, whilst the number of potbanks was declining daily, several television reporters flocked to Longton, to better comprehend the packed Sunday congregations at Longton Spiritualist Church and to investigate the 'hauntings' that were taking place at pottery factories. Two of these reports, not coincidentally, starred Gordon Higginson (ATN, 1969, 1972). Yet, the popular stereotype of the Potteries and its industrial decline casts a dark shadow over Stoke-on-Trent's Spiritualist tradition.

To start illuminating the Spiritualist legacy of Stoke-on-Trent, we first attempted to discover places where Spiritualist gatherings have taken place historically. In Britain, the 1855 Places of Worship Act enabled religious groups to register places where they would be able to hold services. This suggested to us that we would find Spiritualist locations through official archives. The next section focuses on how the official archival record helped us to begin to reconstruct and map the Spiritualist past and present in Stoke-on-Trent. Ultimately, this process told us as much about what we could not find as about the changing map of places of Spiritualist worship.

## Recovering places without memory

Compiling written evidence is the first means through which we sought to identify Spiritualist locations. We began with the existing churches and their records. We quickly discovered that the churches do not keep records in any systematic way. For example, the current president of Longton Spiritualist Church provided us with a copy of the church's registration from 1932. However, prior to that date, the church does not possess any records, so has nothing that would demonstrate the presence and historical continuity of the church before the time Gordon Higginson and his mother, Fanny, were part of the church services in the



early 1900s. The lack of archival material in active churches is common; indeed, church presidents saw the SpELS project as helping them develop a better sense of their own histories (see MacKian, Bartolini, Pile, & Sambo, 2016; Sambo, Bartolini, MacKian, & Pile, 2016).

The National Archives at Kew revealed a list of 24 locations where Spiritualists congregated in Stoke-on-Trent, with the earliest registration dating from 1891. These official records were combined with a search through the local newspaper archives, for a total of thirty-nine locations associated with Spiritualist worship. Where we had specific addresses, we were able to map the sites across the city. By driving and walking Stoke-on-Trent, and through discussions with members of the active Spiritualist churches, we were able to create a Spirit Trail of past and present Spiritualist locations in Stoke-on-Trent from 1870 to 2015 (Figure 1, copies available from the authors). Given the incompleteness of the records and of people's memories, we began to see the trail more as a map of processes of erasures and forgetting, than as a comprehensive map of places of worship.



**Figure 1.** Merged image of the Spirit Trail showing the cover, and excerpts from the map and points description. Source: Design by Marco Scerri.



While we drew on previous work by geographers who investigated urban exploration through walking tours (Battista, LaBelle, Penner, Pile, & Rendell, 2005; Pinder 2001, 2005), our intention with the Spirit Trail was to capture urban places and histories that are on the edge of being forgotten. Hence, we were keen on using the trail to draw attention to particular buildings and locations. Thus, the Spirit Trail is not unlike the more traditional trails that focus on more visible aspects of places, such as their architecture, rivers or parks. As the Spirit Trail was distributed amongst leaflets at Gladstone Pottery Museum and other locations across the city, such as the Stoke-on-Trent railway station, it was important for us to show to locals as well as museum visitors the breadth and reach of Spiritualism across the six towns. However, unlike traditional trails, ours was as much about what could not be seen or what was missing as it was about what still remains. Having obtained Stoke City Council permission to use their tourist base map, the team, with the assistance of graphic designer Marco Scerri, decided to take out the usual elements of the city map, including the tourist spots. This 'stripped down' the map to reflect only two things: the roads linking the six towns and the Spiritualist locations that we found in our research. For us, this emphasizes both the widespread distribution of Spiritualism across the six towns of Stoke-on-Trent, and also the significance of the changing urban landscape in Spiritualism's history.

The Spiritualist places of worship that we uncovered for the Spirit Trail are eclectic and diverse. While they are woven into ongoing transformation of the fabric of Stoke-on-Trent, what is impressive is how transient and covert Spiritualism is. Let us give you some examples. In some cases, Spiritualist places of worship can be hidden within traditional religious structures, most commonly Methodist churches (Figure 2).

Mapping Spiritualist gatherings into the contemporary city's built environment undermines any assumption that most of the locations would be specialized religious buildings,



**Figure 2.** Formerly a Methodist church, this disused Spiritualist church in Tunstall was granted planning permission in 2012 to convert the building into apartments. Source: Photo by Daniele Sambo.

such as churches or chapels, as would be anticipated with common registrations of places of worship. As local newspapers revealed, many services were held in libraries, town halls and shops. Newspapers between 1870 and 1920 regularly featured Spiritualist services in their religious advertisement pages (Figure 3).

Street name changes and new infrastructure and road works during the last century presented us with a challenge for finding specific locations across the six towns. In Fenton and in Longton, the construction of the A500 and its access roads in the 1990s meant that their Spiritualist churches were demolished. As such, some locations we photographed today were devoid of any trace of what might have been there, leaving us to depict seemingly vacant spaces (Figure 4).

In other cases, it was Spiritualists themselves who informed us where they congregated. Although many Spiritualist services were publicly advertised, the fear of prosecution (and persecution) led practitioners to confine their Spiritualist beliefs and practices to the home. Spiritualist medium readings and development circles to train mediums and healers were often hidden from the public, and only those receiving personal invitations would know their precise location. Similarly, some churches were moved to temporary locations that are not recorded in any official form. For instance, before the current Burslem Spiritualist Church building was acquired in 1995, Spiritualists gathered at a local Scout Hut, near the Port Vale football ground (Figure 5).

The process of recovering Spiritualist locations draws attention to wider transformations in the built environment and the transport infrastructure of Stoke-on-Trent since the 1870s. As we have seen, through the Spiritualist past we witness the transient nature of the



**Figure 3.** Notice of a Spiritualist service at King Edward Hall in Hanley in 1911. King Edward Hall was also the site of Webberley's independent bookshop that closed its doors in January 2016, after more than 100 years of trading (it opened in 1913). Source: British Newspaper Archive, The Staffordshire Sentinel, and online commons image.



**Figure 4.** Fenton parking lot, once the site of a Spiritualist church registered in 1915. Source: Photo by Steve Pile.



**Figure 5.** The Scout Hut, a temporary site for Burslem Spiritualist Church in the early 1990s. Source: Photo by Steve Pile.

ever-changing city. Putting the spotlight on the Spiritualist built environment focuses on locations that might otherwise go unnoticed, and highlights how the changes happening



in the city are ongoing, present and continuous. One may speak of current regeneration initiatives, but Stoke-on-Trent has been undergoing numerous changes throughout the last century. Scaling it down to individual and mundane places enables us to see how the everyday is gradually being transformed. For example, one registered place of worship for Spiritualists we photographed was located on Liverpool Road in Stoke, yet the building itself had changed its business by the time the Spirit Trail went to print (Figure 6).

The Spirit Trail maps a fragmented history of Spiritualism in Stoke-on-Trent through the physical spaces of registered places of worship. It also reveals Spiritualism as embedded within the everyday: amidst shops, town halls and scout huts and more. The trail is a visual representation of a movement that appears ephemeral in the city; the dotted map exposes the historical and geographical reach of Spiritualism throughout the six towns since the 1870s. Yet significantly, the Spirit Trail also demonstrates the loss of memory and of tangible heritage in the city. We know that it is not complete *and* we know that it cannot be made complete. However, this is not necessarily a bad thing; cities are always in flux and the changes exhibited in the built environment demonstrate the social, economic and political shifts of different times. But what is remarkable in this case is that Spiritualism simply adapts to these urban disruptions and, rather than disappearing with the material heritage, it crops up elsewhere, moving and rebuilding with the changing times. The recovery of Spiritualist places fills a gap for Spiritualists by proposing a narrative to their movements within the city, resurfacing points of reference within the built environment, even though some of these places have left no traces of their Spiritualist past.

Recovering Spiritualists' use of places of worship suggests that Spiritualism can be found in the built environment. Yet, by shifting from one location to the next, without having to make its presence felt through religious architecture, Spiritualism can still remain hidden: not necessarily purposely, but nonetheless overshadowed by other religious faiths that are more visible within the urban landscape. More importantly, this transience from one gathering place to another with no particular design or architectural requirement also demonstrates that Spiritualism is not tied to specific material forms. This aligns with the way Spiritualists describe Spiritualism in everyday life: theirs is a religion that does not see Spirit embodied only in the materiality of things. Put another way, Spiritualists challenge the idea



**Figure 6.** A registered place of Spiritualist worship in 1941, it went from Sizzle Tanning and Beauty Studio in August 2015 to an antiques shop in November 2015. Source: Photos by Daniele Sambo and Nadia Bartolini.

that ‘memory of place’ is to be found in ‘presence’ and especially in ‘materiality’. Thus, Spiritualism is not as attached to the notions of presence and history as it is attached to Spirit. To better understand what this means, it was necessary for us to gain a sense of how Spiritualists live their spirituality in everyday life. We turn to this in the next section.

## Discovering Spirit in everyday life

As Holloway (2006) has pointed out, the practice most commonly associated with Spiritualism is the *séance*. It conjures up images of a small group of men and women sitting around a table in a dark candlelit room, holding hands with the medium (often a woman) contacting the dead. Popular representations of *séances* have led many to doubt the movement’s veracity, particularly through the spectre of fraud: see for example the 1964 film *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*. But is the *séance* characteristic of Spiritualism today?

In Stoke-on-Trent, we went to the three active Spiritualist churches and met their presidents. They in turn approached members of their congregations and suggested a group of people that were willing to participate in the project. While we had countless conversations with Spiritualists before and after church and healing services, the project conducted in-depth interviews with sixteen Spiritualists. The participants were all British, residing in and around Stoke-on-Trent, comprised nine women and seven men between the ages of 40 and 80. The church presidents made sure that our participant cohort was a representative cross-section of their regular congregation; in other words, that our sample included mediums, healers, psychic artists, those attending development circles and general congregation members that attended either healing or divine services or both. Our aim was to enable Spiritualists to talk about their spirituality in the everyday, outside the church setting.

To achieve this, we gave participants options in terms of how to communicate what they do and how their beliefs weave into their daily lives. So, we gave each participant a notebook where they could express their spirituality through stories and reflections, describe what Spiritualism means to them and how they view the world through their beliefs. We also gave them a disposable camera that they could use when they felt they were experiencing a spiritual moment or to show us something that represented their spirituality.

Much of the work we wished to do with Spiritualists was to understand how their everyday life is shaped by their belief in communicating with the dead. To do this, we drew inspiration from the work of Pratt (2009) by working *with* rather than *on* Spiritualists; again, with the purpose of collaboratively creating a public exhibition (see Endnote 3). At the interview stage, we went to participants’ homes, a private space where historically Spiritualism developed its networks. Along with in-depth interviews and informal discussions, the artist Daniele Sambo took portraits of participants in the space they felt most comfortable in, commonly the living room. Surprisingly, perhaps, many of the interviews did not involve materials. Hence, we often asked whether they could show us pictures, play some music, or show us items that evoked their spirituality. As Carroll indicates, ‘Spiritualism is a religion of storytelling’ (Carroll, 2013, p. 255), and participants were most comfortable when recounting memories and stories with us. While each participant had intimate stories and perspectives, there were common themes through which the place of Spirit in everyday life was invoked.

For example, in talking to Janet and Diane, they evoke ‘Spirit’ in the following way:

*Diane:* [Spiritualism] is a pathway, for me, that I walk; that I’m spiritual in everything that I do. It is a way of life. I couldn’t pick out any particular thing (...) Every day, the way I go

to sleep at night, I say my prayers, I send out healing to the world (...) It's almost like having an inner feeling of knowing that whether we live or whether we die, we are all going to go to the same place; we're all Spirit, so it doesn't hold that fear that maybe some people think about ...

*Janet:* It's the *knowing* that there is help there, that sometimes can't be seen, but you're never on your own. It makes you look at the world a little differently ...

*Q:* Is that what you meant when you said there's no coincidence earlier?

*Janet:* Yes, I don't believe in coincidence ... things happen (...) To me, life is difficult at the moment, but it's little things like that [a spontaneous hug from a child] that tell me it's going to be alright. It is the small everyday things that other people might not see, that goes passed them. (Interview with Janet and Diane, 12/02/2015)

This excerpt from Janet and Diane's interview enables us to highlight five of the most common themes discussed by our participants. These themes are: (1) There is no such thing as coincidence; (2) Sensing a presence; (3) Healing and caring; (4) Spirit makes itself known; (5) Spirituality surrounds us. What is key across all these themes is the ineffable presence of Spirit; a 'spirit' that is communicative through signs. Once you have tuned in to how Spirit communicates, these signs can be picked up in the most mundane of settings.

### ***There is no such thing as coincidence***

Many participants mentioned to us that they believed that there was 'no such thing as coincidence'. This perspective informs how daily life is understood because there is a belief in signs, of interconnectedness. In his notebook and interview, James talks about the circumstances of meeting his future wife. He mentions that she came from up North visiting a relative in Stoke-on-Trent and only chanced upon going to a Spiritualist service because her neighbour wanted to try it out, and it was at this service that he met her. He described this as 'proof of Spirit working' (notebook entry and interview with James 11/02/2015). For James, it wasn't just chance; it was 'meant to be' and Spirit in this sense intervenes to enable us to see the signs (if we choose to see them).

In another interview, Anne described the story of when she had been driving around, lost and confused, and stopped to try to get her bearings. At that moment, she heard a cry: from afar she saw a sheep all tangled up in barbed wire. She got some cutters out of her car boot and rescued the sheep. Today, she sees this as a sign; part of a particular pattern – as though they are pieces of a puzzle:

Those are the things that you think to yourself, 'Did you take the wrong road? Were you lost or were you led?'. Because those things happened years ago, but it's now my thinking, yeah – we don't always see the things at the time (...) and as time goes on and we look back, it's worked out for the better. I believe that there's a bigger picture, that we're part of a bigger picture. I'm not saying that Spirit interferes in your life, but maybe leads you to a better life. (Interview with Anne 16/02/2015)

For Fred, the path leading him to becoming a medium took the shape of Pegasus. In 2005, when he got the opportunity to go to Stansted Hall's Open Week,<sup>5</sup> during meditation, he asked for a sign to help him decide whether he should pursue mediumship training. It came to him in the form of a horse with spread wings. From that moment on, he started seeing the winged horse of Pegasus everywhere. As Fred tells his story, he highlights all the moments when Pegasus inadvertently comes into his field of vision. This might seem fantastical, as it

is a mythical figure, however Fred points to ordinary things such as a DVD, a book lying around or the branding of a bus line – in other words, things from everyday life. If the appearance of Pegasus may seem banal for some, for Fred, it is replete with spiritual meaning. Pegasus is, for him, a guide that helps him make better decisions in life.

### ***Sensing a presence***

Sam told us that when he was young, he was very isolated and did not have any form of parenting, so he spent most of his time surviving. He did not have any social skills, but knew that he did not want anyone else to be treated the way he had been. To survive, he told us:

I've always felt some kind of guidance or ... I've always been aware of someone there. All through my life, I've always been in search of some kind of answer for that. I've gone into different religions and never found anything that's been settling for me. When I was in the army, I experienced quite a few things and scathings that actually guided me out of them ... it's quite bizarre really. (Interview with Sam 20/03/2015)

The feeling of sensing a presence and of being guided is shared by many of the participants. However, let us be clear that this presence does not take a ghostly or spectral form; Spirit for Spiritualists reveals itself not in haunted and haunting ways, but rather as a guide or an intuition. So, in their life stories, both Sam and George pointed to the help of Spirit while they served in wars. Indeed, Sam and George survived wartime missions and felt the need to understand their experiences. This kind of story is not uncommon. There are stories of soldiers that served alongside Gordon Higginson in the Second World War who also mention remarkable moments when they emerged unscathed (Bassett, 1990). Conventional wisdoms, however, left a deficit for these men. It is through Spiritualism, and by getting messages from mediums at Spiritualist services, that George finds a rationale:

Things that have happened to me in my life, I suddenly realized that my dad, who got killed in the Second World War, he's been there and looked after me all my life. Things that have happened to me and I think 'Why?'; and then when I started going to the Spiritualist church, and they come to me, and they were telling me things that had happened to me, then I realized that me [*sic*] dad looked after me from the age of 6. (Interview with George 11/02/2015)

Because of this newfound belief, George has been lighting a candle every morning in the hallway of his home and then goes to the sitting room where he has pictures of his deceased father and brother-in-law and says out loud 'Morning lads, you alright?' (Figure 7). For George, this daily activity provides security and comfort. Greeting those who passed on, but whose presence he still feels around him daily, is part of acknowledging that he is not alone.

### ***Healing and caring***

The sense of continuity of life, of never being alone, is a core sentiment of Spiritualist thinking that weaves into everyday practices. But these practices are not reserved for home life. For healers, being available when needs arise is part and parcel of serving the community. Sometimes, healing has to be improvised in far-from-ideal conditions:

I remember one old chap, he insisted having his healing while watching the television. 'I'm not missing the football ...' and it taught you to cope with all these disturbances and distractions. Later on, I remember in work situations, at a party once when one person was taken ill and I was giving this healing in the middle of this party with a glass of sherry in one hand and a cigar in the other! It was ridiculous, and that is dead opposite to what we were taught: you should get





**Figure 7.** The candle that is lit every morning by George. Source: Photo by Daniele Sambo.

your mind clear, your body clean and everything quiet and sit in meditation to do this attunement ... well that's the biggest load of nonsense I've ever heard 'cause it isn't practical. If you are a healer, as such, you're a battery with two terminals and as soon as something gets near: 'tschhht', it's got you. (Interview with Bill 27/01/2015)

Bill's sense that the body is a source of energy is shared by many Spiritualists. For many, this energy flows through bodies as much as being a property of the body. For others, the source of healing is more diffuse, less connected to the body. Beth's sense of healing is drawn from practising as a Reiki master for over 30 years. While she says she does not do Spiritualist healing as such, Beth believes that

it all comes from the same source ... it doesn't matter, as long as you heal, as long as people are healed. And by saying that, I feel that healing isn't actually curing because healing comes on many levels. People can still pass to spirit but feel healed in their mind, and emotionally. Because inevitably, we're all going to pop off, aren't we? It's a true fact and you can't heal that, you can't cure that – why would you want to? (Interview with Beth 27/01/2015)

Healing was described by others as a way of caring for the community. Diane and Janet started a charity 25 years ago in their community, and explained that for many people, chatting, having a cup of tea and just listening was part of healing; it provides a sense of community and feeling cared for. When we spoke to George, he had just retired from being a volunteer at Douglas Macmillan Hospice<sup>6</sup> for 25 years. With the disposable camera, George's wife Eve took a picture of the care packages she does (Figure 8). For Eve, making these objects regularly and giving them to those in the hospice is a way for her to give back to the community, of 'being a good person' and an expression of her spirituality (Interview with Eve on 11/02/2015).

These examples of there not being coincidence, sensing a presence and healing and caring provide an appreciation of how hidden histories are resurfaced in everyday life. Importantly, for our participants who all came from working class backgrounds, memories are constructed first through Spirit, and subsequently represented and performed in the everyday. By recounting stories, our Spiritualist participants enabled us to grasp the concept of Spirit through actions, feelings, emotional attachment and signs. In addition, it is through this retelling of their life stories that they can look back and reassess what happened. Reconstructing memories according to present circumstances is not unusual (Halbwachs & Coser, 1968/1992; Middleton & Brown, 2005; Nora, 1989; Robertson & Hall, 2007). What is



**Figure 8.** Eve's picture of the care packages she creates for those at the Douglas Macmillan Hospice.

noticeable here is that the re-evaluation of the memory incorporates the evidence of Spirit. Nonetheless, the stories themselves are not extraordinary, nor can they be categorized as supernatural, quite the contrary. Yet, they elucidate how, when infused with Spirit, these sometimes mundane and sometimes traumatic wartime memories give meaning to our participants' spirituality and their existence on earth.

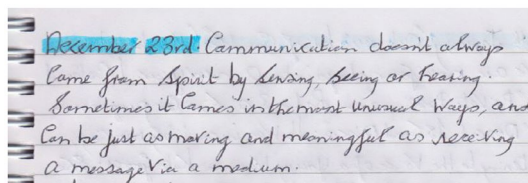
### ***Spirit makes itself known***

Our interviews showed that there are many ways that Spirit can make itself known. For Richard, the transition from Catholicism to Spiritualism enables him to appreciate the diverse manifestations of God:

I don't think as a Catholic I ever quite saw the image of God as a person. But I think in becoming and being very involved with Spiritualism, I think I was able to sort of define it better for myself so that it came in various forms, really – this energy of God or this love of God. It came in a variety of ways and I saw it more as a sort of consuming sort of power, and the power of the whole, of the universe, of the good and bad. (Interview with Richard 03/02/2015)

While Spirit reveals itself through mediums and signs, Richard points out in his notebook that Spirit can also come through in unexpected ways (Figure 9):

What Richard is alluding to in his notebook entry is a story that he recounted to us during an interview. On the first anniversary of his father's passing, a beautiful butterfly appeared in Richard's bathroom on the coldest day that winter. In the autumn of the same year after his very close neighbour Deborah had passed, a butterfly appeared in his living room. It



**Figure 9.** Excerpt from Richard's notebook. *December 23rd. Communication doesn't always come from Spirit by sensing, seeing or hearing. Sometimes it comes in the most unusual ways, and can be just as moving and meaningful as receiving a message via a medium.*

settled itself on the top corner of the cupboard and remained there throughout the winter. On the day of the first anniversary of Deborah's passing, the butterfly flew to the window and stayed there for 10 days until it had passed. Richard does not believe that these butterflies embody the spirit of either Deborah or his father or that they are a reincarnation of them – they are simply butterflies. But for him, the appearance of the butterflies at odd times of the year and on the anniversaries of their deaths is not coincidence, but rather the demonstration of communication with Spirit.

To illustrate what he was talking about, Richard excused himself from the interview for a moment, and came back with a small box that he slowly opened in front of us and rested on the table. We were curious to know what it contained. There was a feeling of anticipation as Richard opened the box to show us the butterfly amidst his little sewing kit (Figure 10).

This moment captures a significant aspect of Richard's spiritual beliefs. He was able to show us his beliefs take a physical form – partly, the butterflies are evidence of the story, but they also materialize spirit communication. His memory of Deborah, further, sits amongst his everyday ornaments and memorabilia, as the butterfly resides in the sewing kit. However, it is a particular way of 'materializing', as it is not Spirit itself. This is significant because matter is not personified (incarnate or reincarnated), not haunted, and not vibrant on its own – and therefore cannot be understood through agency<sup>7</sup>; rather, matter requires Spirit to have meaning.

Our record of the story is not just found in the spoken word, but also manifest through the artist Daniele Sambo taking a photograph of the butterfly at the time (see Figure 10). Yet, with no further explanation, the photograph itself would convey limited understanding of why a butterfly in a sewing kit is meaningful to Richard. Here, we wish to highlight the need for a mix of methods, from semi-structured interviewing, the written word and photography, each contributing a different sense of *memory* and of *place*. Yet, this mix also remains partial. It does not add up to Spirit itself.

For Richard, the story and the importance of this story – and why he needed to tell it during the interview in his home – lies in synchronicity: that is, the meaningful connection between events that are not causally related. Richard observed that it is only when he *recalled* the story while writing it down in his notebook, *pinning down the timings and dates*, that he noticed the synchronicity with the events: how things started lining up and slowly, the pieces



**Figure 10.** The butterfly amidst Richard's sewing kit. Source: Photo by Daniele Sambo.

of the puzzle coming together as a whole. Before then, he remembers thinking during the occasions that they were lovely moments and he accepted them as such. However, now, he sees this synchronicity as evidence of life after death. Since communication is a process in Spiritualism, Richard had not realized the full extent of the synchronicity until his memories were noted down. In this sense, Richard's realization alludes to what James earlier on describes as 'proof of Spirit working'.

Richard's story reminds us of Marcel Proust's *madeleine* when the tea-infused biscuit conjures up recollections of his childhood in Combray (Proust & Compagnon, 1988). For Middleton and Brown (2005), it is the materiality of the objects that enables memories to resurface. However, in this case, the meaning associated with the butterflies is constructed entirely from Richard's spirituality: the butterflies are not a direct link to Deborah and his father, but rather a sign that stems from the belief of communicating with the dead. Importantly, Richard's memories come alive *because* Spirit had been communicating with him, and this communication was done through the representation of the butterflies. In other words, the material world takes on meaning through Spirit, but it is not Spirit itself. As importantly, this is a story that evokes transformation, between this world and the next, as well as between material, embodied form (human, butterfly) and Spirit.

For us, Richard's butterflies also connect to the idea of 'memory of place'. Clearly, Richard has spent some time experiencing and recounting his butterfly story: from the time he starts noticing a pattern, to writing it down in the notebook, to telling the story to others, to recounting it to us while in his home. Richard, therefore, works through this experience many times over, trying to better understand what is happening in space and time – and also so that his spirituality better fits with his experiences – and vice versa. This working through is much like memory-work (Till, 2005), continually seeking to understand the relationships between things by combining and recombining them until a pattern emerges: in this case, the ineffable, the otherworldliness of Spirit, the materiality of the butterflies, and being in place. Richard can therefore show us *in situ* how the butterflies came into his house, where the butterflies went in the intimate space of his home, and in which container he has placed them (in a sewing kit and a plastic bucket in the bathroom). The performance of his memory-work is therefore done in place, where place becomes part of the evidentiary framework associated with Richard's spirituality.

### ***Spirituality surrounds us***

We have described moments, experiences and signs where Spirit comes through, yet there is also a much more diffuse sense of Spirit pervading the world around us. Some participants chose to use the disposable camera to express their spirituality, and photographs were accompanied with a description in their notebooks. Some photographs depict family members or objects (like a CD or mementos) taken from inside the home. However, there are also photographs taken outside.

The photographs taken outdoors appear to capture the ineffable, the intangible manifestation of the spiritual. During the interviews, when discussing nature – which often came up as an important aspect in their association with Spirit – many participants associated the simplicity and beauty of nature with God and the spiritual. While Martin's notebook is sparsely written, it was through the photographs that he expressed himself, such as in this example (Figure 11):



**Figure 11.** Martin finds this scene ‘naturally spiritual’.

In relation to Figure 11, he wrote the following in his notebook:

This view sold our home to us. Every day, I look out of the window to see a different picture which nature brings. And in this place ‘Our Home’, here I feel safe, warm, secure & happy.

How naturally spiritual is that.

Something we all probably take for granted. (Martin, approx. Dec 2014)

Near his house, Martin told us in his interview that he often takes walks by the canal. This is where once china clay was shipped by sea from Cornwall to Liverpool, and then travelled down the barges to Stoke-on-Trent. These mundane waterways associated with post-industrial heritage may in some respects appear sentimental and kitsch (Atkinson, 2007), yet for Martin, one of these walks inspires a photograph (Figure 12) and a notebook entry:

A tranquil walk, on our doorstep.

How lovely to have all this natural beauty around us all, everywhere.

If only we stopped for one minute and absorbed all this glorious, natural beauty around us. (Martin, approx. Dec. 2014)



**Figure 12.** Martin’s canal walk in Stoke-on-Trent.



The emphasis on the everyday appreciation of nature captures a further spatial conception of memory of place from previous studies focusing on material culture in landscapes (for instance in Crang and Tolia-Kelly, 2010). Here, a more personal experience is evoked that interweaves spirituality with, for Martin, everyday spaces. These photographs also contrast strongly with the post-industrial image of the built environment in decline. Indeed, one might not associate these tranquil scenes depicted by Martin as being in Stoke-on-Trent, so serene do they seem. Yet, working class lives in Stoke-on-Trent are often shaped by the city's pottery history of which the canals formed an important link to the industry as well as a marker on the landscape. Stoke-on-Trent's changing urban fabric has seen these 'working' canals shift to becoming 'natural' walkways and regenerated settings. For Spiritualists, expressing their spirituality in the everyday therefore draws in both the natural and cultural heritage of the city. As this project attests to, it is through Spiritualism that we glean participants' appreciation of the natural environment in and around Stoke-on-Trent, an aspect often ignored by the media, yet a vital part of its heritage. It is also through Spiritualist places of worship along with personal Spiritualist practices that we gain a better understanding of cultural heritage as well as spirituality as a concept that transcends the often times compartmentalized and spatially segregated domain of religion.

When outdoors, participants also took photographs of trees and sprouting buds, birds and domestic animals. Most were taken in their own gardens or a nearby park. This picture taken by Anne at first surprised and baffled us (Figure 13). How is Spirit in this picture, we asked?

In her notebook, Anne had written the following:

Trains, buses, planes are all forms of transport. Our bodies are but forms of transport for our souls until our soul departs. Our bodies just house our souls so we can do the work we need to do.

Anne's photograph and her description epitomize how belief systems can shape a person's experience of everyday life. Anne took the time to pause at a busy roundabout junction in Stoke-on-Trent to show us something that at first glance appears utterly mundane, yet is freighted with Spirit. Spirit may seem ineffable and intangible, yet it can also be woven through the material, temporal world. Even so, the vehicles are simply a metaphor for the spiritual and, ultimately, the Spiritualist belief that life persists after the death of the body.



**Figure 13.** Our bodies as forms of transport (Anne, approx. Dec 2014).

As Bill often told us, material objects are not where Spiritualism lies. Nonetheless, here, we can see the play between Spirit, materiality and representation. Spirit can manifest in the material world, yet it is never wholly material nor fully present in the material world. This is important as what our research captures is how Spirit does not settle into words or in the material.<sup>8</sup> And indeed, Spirit, as we have shown, does not settle because it is not a determinable entity.

Further, since Spirit is mundane and ordinary, it more often seeks an earthly form through everyday materials other than those associated with the sacred or hauntings. Hence, vehicles, butterflies and nature are some of the materialities through which Spiritualists can evidence their beliefs and spirituality. In other words, Spirit is always manifest through a variety of representational forms, yet it is not the same as its representatives either. Thus, the material does not provide a direct link to spiritual practice, but it does point to the ease through which Spiritualists find and experience Spirit in everyday places. This is because Spirit – not materiality – is the agent that gives meaning to earthly existence and communication with the dead.

Even if Spirit is not a determinable entity, what we have learned during this study is that, even when the historical record is sparse, Spiritualists' practices reveal the spiritual production of space in the quotidian. The home is a location where spiritual practice is safely assumed, and where George and Richard can work through spiritual patterns and rituals. Whilst Diane, Janet and Eve demonstrate how public spaces capture an attentiveness to spiritual caring and healing. Martin's examples provide a different perspective of a post-industrial city as its working canals give way to revegetated walking routes that evoke beauty. Finally, Anne's spatial contribution is more diffuse – focusing instead on a busy, redeveloped roundabout leading to a motorway to associate the earthly body with a vehicle. These are not sites of remembrance or sites evoking a particular rhetoric of identity, race or nationalism. That is, they are not the kinds of locations that would register as 'memory of place' places. Rather, these places are part of the mundane everyday, bearing witness to the different ways through which spirituality is expressed in the contemporary fabric of Stoke-on-Trent.

## Conclusion

This paper's principal aim is to challenge some assumptions contained in the notion of 'memory of place'. The majority of studies in geography focusing on memories of place demonstrate how memories are recoverable through traces that are material in nature, and that these traces build a sense of place. However, when dealing with partial, fragmented and lost memories, we have found that spirituality recontextualizes memory in ways that detach it from materiality, but not (necessarily) place.

Our research explores the place of spirituality in everyday life through insights from Spiritualist churches and their congregations in Stoke-on-Trent. To gain a better understanding of Spiritualism's history in the city, we aimed to find evidence of the movement's material presence in the built environment. By going through archival records, old newspapers and photographing historical and contemporary Spiritualist places of worship, the Spirit Trail mapped the built environment associated with Spiritualism's place in Stoke-on-Trent. Yet, if the trail assisted in 'seeing' the presence of Spiritualism since 1870, it also painted a fragmented history of the movement. This incomplete picture, one that might never form a complete whole, demonstrates a city in flux, but it also suggests a movement in flux. As we



discovered, rather than disappearing like its material traces, Spiritualism in Stoke-on-Trent simply adapted and moved with the changing city. Spiritualists we spoke to feel part of a rich and vibrant community even though most of its material traces have disappeared. This is because Spiritualism is not tied to materiality, but to Spirit, and the loss of material memory does not prevent Spiritualism's presence from persisting in Stoke-on-Trent.

The Spirit Trail recovered some memories of Spiritualists' movements within the city. However, for them, Spirit was not in the traces left in the urban fabric which explains why we were more preoccupied with the movement's material history than they were. It is instead through their spiritual practices that we could get a glimpse of where meaning lay: their spiritual beliefs ran *through* and *alongside* the material but the material was never Spirit itself. This is not to say that materiality does not play a role. The role it plays, however, is unlike studies exploring the matter/spirit duality and matter as agency. This is because matter does not act as an agent; Spirit does. And it is *Spirit* that Spiritualists take from, and weave into, everyday life.

That said, whilst Spiritualism's tenets do not privilege materiality, this paper demonstrates that there are a variety of relationships between matter and Spirit. However, the Spiritualist exploration of Spirit interferes with any dichotomized understanding of materiality and immateriality: though Spirit is capable of (representational and material) presence and influence in the world of the living as well as the living having and embodying Spirit, it remains ineffable, indeterminate, discarnate, intangible. Certainly, our Spiritualist participants themselves use objects in a variety of ways. In this case, rather than being infused with meaning, materiality is an enabler that (a) contributes to expressing spirituality, and (b) provides evidence of life after death. This kind of materiality, then, begins to shed some light as to how memories can be constructed in place: in the intimate rooms of a home; in a charity shop and local hospice; in nature; on a busy roundabout. Perhaps because of their fixation on materiality, studies of 'memory of place' have rarely considered the complexities of spiritual practice and of belief systems (that is, of non-secular ontologies). Yet, studies in religion and spirituality ask more from us than to add them to research on the relationship between memory and place; they require researchers to move in a space that interweaves the spiritual and the temporal, the ineffable and the material, the seen and the unseen.

## Notes

1. Some of these studies engage with affect and materiality. For a discussion on affect in relation to the SpELS project, please see Bartolini, MacKian, and Pile (2017).
2. There are numerous studies outside of Geography that explore the matter/spirit duality (for example in Bowman & Valk, 2012; Morgan, 2009; Spyer, 1998; Willem Jones & Matthew-Jones, 2015). However, these studies focus on objects being infused with meaning rather than how place is evoked through memory.
3. The public exhibition titled 'Talking with the Dead: Spiritualism in Stoke-on-Trent' took place at Gladstone Pottery Museum from September to November 2015. It featured a living room that displayed objects from participants' homes and Spiritualist churches, as well as interactive audio-visual materials from archives and pawn shops in and around Stoke-on-Trent. More information can be found on the exhibition website. URL: <http://www.talkingwiththedead.co.uk/>. Two books were also produced from the SpELS project.
4. The Spiritualist movement spread to many parts of the world, including Australia (Carroll, 2013), and sometimes took on different forms depending on the proximity of other spiritual and religious influences (Moreman, 2013; Wilson, 2011).

5. Stansted Hall refers to the Arthur Findlay College, the foremost college of the Spiritualists' National Union for the advancement of Spiritualism and psychic sciences, where one can train and obtain certificates.
6. Douglas Macmillan Hospice is a specialist palliative care provider in North Staffordshire for adults, the majority of whom are affected by cancer. URL: <http://www.dmhospice.org.uk/>.
7. See Bartolini (2015) for a review on literature relating to materiality and agency.
8. Such materializations are not about presence/absence as in haunting and spectrality, but about the ways in which Spirit is materialized in specific forms, which can be both material and ineffable: see Bartolini, MacKian & Pile (2017).

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